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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

30 November 1966

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The View from Hanoi

1. What is the view from Hanoi? What is Hanoi's current evaluation of: (a) the course of the war? (b) the political situation in South Vietnam? (c) the international climate, including US domestic opinion?

2. The Military Situation. In the spring of 1965 Hanoi made two fateful decisions. The first was to pass up an opportunity for negotiations, provided by a private Soviet proposal to reconvene the Geneva conference; this was soon followed by the famous four points, a program patently designed to discourage any negotiations. The second decision was to meet the prospective American buildup of ground forces by continuing the input of North Vietnamese regular units, and trying to maintain offensive operations, decisions which apparently were questioned by some "comrades," including perhaps General Giap.

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3. Hanoi has had a good 12 months to evaluate the consequences of this general policy. From the military viewpoint, developments must be fairly discouraging. Since the inconclusive battle of the Ia Drang Valley (November 1965), the regular NVN regiments have not won any major engagement. Even if one accepts the official NVN position that this is a protracted war of attrition, the statistics cast doubt on the validity of Hanoi's previous strategy. To the extent to which wars can be measured by statistics the NVA/VC forces are losing.

4. The operation across the DMZ which began in June provided further evidence that their offensive strategy was faltering. It is still not too clear what precise objectives this bold move was intended to accomplish. But whatever its purpose the operation was stalled. No important ground was gained, only a small American force was diverted from another area, and no little Dienbienphus were contrived before the US congressional elections.

5. Adding to the setback in the northern tip of South Vietnam was the mauling of the NVA/VC in Binh Dinh (Operation Irving) followed by the equally costly operation in Tay Ninh (Operation Attleboro) which took a heavy toll of men and materiel

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in the long held base area of War Zone C. What must be impressive to Hanoi is the ability of the US to move from one major battle to another, while the NVA/VC have been incapable of mounting a series of major offensive operations which would seem necessary to the success of their strategy.

6. For example, there was apparently no effort made to relieve the pressures in the DMZ by major action elsewhere, which points up a simple fact about the war: the NVA/VC units can no longer mount or prepare major operations without inviting highly damaging US spoiling attacks. The proposition that the Communist forces have lost the battlefield initiative has become a cliché, but it is nevertheless one that must be disturbing to Hanoi.*

7. It can be argued, of course, that Hanoi does not take such a short-term view, but sees the war as part of a long-term revolutionary process which began 20 years ago. Moreover, the North Vietnamese can point to some significant achievements: their main forces are larger today than a year ago and the flow of men

* For example, the present situation bears little resemblance to General Giap's claim of last May, "In the military field, the Southern people now have a strong regular force, capable of fighting increasingly large battles."

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and materiel is at least adequate to maintain this level. The intervention of the US has not yet shaken morale importantly. And an entire area -- the Delta -- has been relatively unaffected by the US action. In short, the NVA/VC forces are still intact.

8. How important is the military factor? Over a year ago General Giap asserted, "the essential problem, the decisive problem is who will be the final victor on the battlefields of South Vietnam ...". If we are in any significant measure correct in our judgment of how the situation looks to them, the Communist military strategists must already have had doubts over their future strategy.

9. The Political Situation. On the political front, Ho Chi Minh and his advisors are faced with a more ambiguous situation. One hard fact confronting Hanoi, however, is the surprising durability of the Ky government despite repeated crises. If the NVN regime has been counting on a state of permanent upheaval in Saigon, they should now revise their estimate. To be sure, there will be more crises, squabbles, and infighting in Saigon, but even some consistent critics are allowing a bit of optimism to creep into their observations.*

* For example, Denis Warner, "South Vietnam's Political Awakening," The Reporter, 17 November 1966.

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10. Hanoi could, of course, take refuge in the long view. It might reason that a superficial stability cannot conceal the fundamental problems of regional and religious conflicts which inevitably come to the fore in South Vietnam. Hanoi might postpone decisions about the war in the hope that, over the next year, the work of the constituent assembly and national elections could produce a South Vietnamese government more favorable to the Communists as a prospective negotiating partner. Or they may believe that the process of developing a constitutional government will prove so disruptive that recent progress will be wiped out.

11. But it cannot be too comforting, if Hanoi's leaders compare the current situation with their estimate in early 1965 that the complete collapse of South Vietnam was not far off. And they must be influenced by the fact that despite the successive turn-overs in Saigon, no important political, military, or religious figure has defected to the National Front since the death of Diem.

12. Of considerable concern to Hanoi, perhaps even more so than the political developments in Saigon, is the effectiveness of the Revolutionary Development program. This threatens the VC directly. Hanoi's propaganda and military actions are strong indications that destroying this program is a key objective. Hanoi probably views

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this program as relatively ineffective, thus far, it is probably more apprehensive over the future. Of particular concern to Hanoi would be the assignement of more ARVN units to security roles, since this would require the VC to use larger, better armed units to combat the Revolutionary Development program.

13. The Enemy -- the US. Some of these political developments in Saigon as well as the trends on the battleground have been apparent for some time. Thus, in order to account for Hanoi's persistent determination to fight on, many Western observers have increasingly focused on the state of US domestic and international opinion as the main prop in Hanoi's calculations. It is difficult to see these matters from Hanoi's point of view. How do the Communist leaders evaluate a student riot at Berkeley or Harvard? How do they interpret the election of Congressman X or the defeat of Senator Y? The standard estimate has been that Hanoi believes that a combination of US and international opinion will eventually force the US to offer important concessions to disengage from the war.

14. One wonders whether this is still a sound estimate of Hanoi's view. It is characteristic of hoary Marxist-Leninist analyses that "the people" will prevail on the capitalists to

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change their policies. But Communist leaders have become much more sophisticated since the 1920's and 1930's, and Ho Chi Minh has a well deserved reputation for political acuity. Ho should now recognize that the effect of US opinion on US policy is difficult enough for Dr. Gallup and Lou Harris to measure, let alone for the American section of the NVN foreign office. And public opinion is a weak reed on which to base a political-military strategy.

15. The trouble is that Ho has been through this before with the French. Even General Giap concedes that French politics were as important to his victory as the tide of battle. We do not know whether Ho really believes, as he claims, that the US will decide to give way, or whether he clings to this out of growing desperation. Unfortunately, it makes quite a difference.

16. In any case, the North Vietnamese almost certainly recognize that the presidential election of 1968 is an important target date for planning purposes. If they do still believe that American opinion and politics will in the long term prove decisive, then there is a strong incentive to hang on until mid-1968. Nevertheless, they must worry whether frustration over the war will

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lead to a sharp escalation over the next 18 months. Thus, this important factor can work in both ways on Hanoi.

17. As far as hard evidence is concerned, there is none. The repeated statements of various Vietnamese are not a good guide, since one could hardly expect them to engage in a frank analysis either with the Premier of Rumania or an AFP correspondent. But it may be indicative that Hanoi's reaction to the results of US congressional elections has been to dismiss them as unimportant. Hanoi could have chosen to read into the results a growing opposition to the war, or at least emphasize this propaganda line. That they did not may mean they are backing off one step, so as not to encourage illusion in their own country.

18. The International Climate. As to Hanoi's evaluation of international opinion, the picture may be a little clearer. As the Economist pointed out recently, the vaunted "third force" is not at present a very effective factor in international politics. If Hanoi's leaders expected a year ago that a ground swell of international opinion would eventually overwhelm the US, they

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must now be quite disappointed. Undoubtedly fate has dealt them some unkind blows: some of the more strident voices, Nkrumah's, Ben Bella's, Sukarno's are silent, and Hanoi pays some price, for example in India, for its close alliance with China. Finally, Hanoi's own intransigence has repeatedly denied potential supporters the opportunity and the means to bring real diplomatic pressures on the US. It is perhaps indicative of the state of affairs, that outside the Communist world, Bertrand Russell is currently Hanoi's loudest and most colorful champion.

19. China -- the Uncertain Ally. A new factor bearing on Hanoi's position is the crisis in China. Hanoi cannot fail to be seriously concerned about the disruption of a previously stable political leadership in Peking. Hanoi is affected in two ways. First, there is the growing tension between Moscow and Peking. To be sure Hanoi has managed to steer clear of this conflict and fairly skillfully, and has even profited materially from Sino-Soviet competition. But given the uncertainties in China, there is a growing chance that China might force Hanoi to take a stand against Russia. The attitude of the Chinese toward "fence

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sitting" has become progressively sharper. Hanoi is likely to see little choice but to align with China. This must seem highly unpalatable.

20. A second effect on Hanoi of China's situation may be that China now looks less reliable as a deterrent. The North Vietnamese cannot have failed to notice that China's role in and its international role as Hanoi's champion have been greatly over-shadowed by Peking's domestic troubles. Of course, China's military potential has not diminished, but there is a growing impression abroad, particularly in Japan, that the danger of Chinese intervention is receding. Thus, Hanoi tends to be deprived of a high card. The firing of China's nuclear missile caused some international apprehension over the development of a strategic capability, but Hanoi probably realizes that this is still too far in the future to affect the current situation.

21. In sum, China is increasingly exposed as a rather uncertain and unstable ally, and the net result may be a loss of Chinese influence in Hanoi.

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22. The USSR. It has usually been considered that the USSR was a counterweight to the Chinese in Hanoi, and that a rise in Soviet influence meant a rise in the chance of a negotiating situation. As far as the Soviet attitude was concerned, this was probably more likely in the early days of Soviet involvement in the war than now. The Soviets may see certain byproducts from the war in terms of their own interests: strains on American resources and aggravation of US problems in Europe. At the same time, the Soviets must be aware of the risk of escalation. And neither China nor Russia has the degree of influence or control necessary to force political or military decisions on Hanoi. Thus, the USSR has little choice but to wait for the moment in which Hanoi seems susceptible to Soviet advice. Such advice probably would be for Hanoi to move toward political action, but the Soviets probably also realize that they cannot provide the guarantee of an outcome that would satisfy Hanoi.

23. Hanoi's Future Strategy. The foregoing presents a bleak picture for Hanoi and a probability that it will become worse. Even so, Hanoi is not necessarily as impressed as an outside observer with what the latter would see as adversity. The North

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Vietnamese are apt to view their overall situation as worse than a year ago, but not yet critical. They almost certainly would believe that their present situation is much better than the Viet Minh's prospects in say 1951. But the question remains whether they will conclude that their basic interests can be better served by a new and different combination of military and political tactics.

24. Hanoi could view its future strategy in terms of three options. First, to change the character of the war by escalation either through use of their own forces or by calling in the Chinese. This seems highly unlikely and has seemed so for some time. Escalation in this manner is probably not a serious alternative at present, especially as long as the situation in China is so unstable. This does not mean that Hanoi will not keep the pressure on the US by the use of a select number of Communist "volunteers" in NVN.

25. Hanoi could change the nature of the war in another way, by reverting to "protracted war" in which guerilla operations are primary. This alternative must seem attractive in the military

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sense. Operations in small units, terrorism, sabotage, etc., might hold the answer to the question of how to cope with superior US mobility and fire power in large engagements. A guerrilla strategy, moreover, would be consistent with a policy of long term resistance, in which the war weariness of the enemy becomes the main objective. Under this strategy, Hanoi would have several options for disposing the NVA regiments. It could break them down into smaller units, or it could retain them in tact as a potential threat in order to tie down American forces in certain areas. Hanoi might even withdraw certain units, attempting to bargain for a US withdrawal.

26. The key question, however, is whether a reversion from a supposedly higher stage of revolutionary warfare to a lower one can be accomplished without serious damage to the morale and the structure of the fighting force. According to General Giap, "guerrilla war must multiply. To keep itself in life and develop, guerrilla warfare has necessarily to develop into mobile warfare. This is a general law." There is some evidence that this issue of guerrilla versus mobile warfare has been under debate in Hanoi, though it is expressed in a modified

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form, i.e., "offensive" versus "defensive" operations. It may be that we are already witnessing an adjustment toward the "defensive" option.

27. One consequence of a shift in military strategy toward protracted, guerrilla operation might be a loosening up of political tactics. Hanoi's handling of the four point program and its relationship to negotiations might be modified. They might hope to regain some international support by appearing more flexible and in the process to create apprehension in Saigon and uncertainties in the US. Thus Hanoi might seek to create an ambiguous situation in which the US would find it politically difficult to maintain or increase the military pressures, particularly the bombing of North Vietnam.

28. An alternative to such a change in tactics would be a more basic shift in political strategy. That is, the North Vietnamese might attempt to obtain by negotiations or reciprocal actions a US withdrawal or diminution of the war in the expectation of gaining their objectives by means other than those they have been pursuing. This alternative too may be up for reappraisal

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in Hanoi, though there is no hard evidence that this is so. The recent overtures to the US from the USSR and Eastern Europeans for a pause in bombing operations could be an indication that Hanoi's resolve to reject any move toward negotiations is weakening. Some recent hints of changes in the fortunes of top level leaders in Hanoi could indicate that a policy review is underway.

29. Hanoi's opposition to negotiations and the reasons for it are well known and need not be discussed at length. The North Vietnamese must still be deeply suspicious that any negotiations will deny them the important gains they believe have been won on the battlefield. The main question in their minds, however, may be whether some negotiation is inevitable, and whether their position will be stronger or weaker. A year ago they probably estimated that it would be stronger, now they must have doubts.

30. Our best judgment is that faced with the defeat of its present strategy and confronted with unpalatable options, Hanoi is procrastinating. Next spring, after the dry season, is a more likely time than now for modifications in strategy. But if Hanoi is now reconsidering its fortunes, then the two live options

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are a modification of military tactics toward guerrilla operations or a shift toward the political track, with all its hazards. Our view is that the military option -- i.e., some new combination of guerrilla and large unit operations -- is still likely to be the preferred course; and given time to work out the consequences and problems, Hanoi may move this way. But this is by no means certain, and for the first time in the last two years, there is a chance of a serious political move from the Communist side.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



SHERMAN KENT
Chairman

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MEMORANDUM FOR: *ONE*

I think this is a particularly fine paper and one which ~~which~~ bears very directly on a series of questions posed by SECDEF yesterday. SAVA is working up the answer you may be interested in the additional questions. If so, can provide. Who wrote this paper?

(DATE)

J (D/DCI)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101 WHICH MAY BE USED.

(47)

TRANSMITTAL SLIP

DATE 1 ec 66

TO: Dr. Kent

ROOM NO. BUILDING

MARKS:

Please note Adm. Taylor's comment.

GBMcManus

FROM: EA/DDCI

ROOM NO. BUILDING EXTENSION

FORM NO. 241 1 FEB 55

REPLACES FORM 36-8 WHICH MAY BE USED.

GPO: 1957-O-439445

(47)

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Director

Chet Cooper participated in the preparation of this Memorandum. We have sent a copy to him. Otherwise it has been distributed only within the Agency.

SHERMAN KENT
Director
National Estimates

30 November 1966
(DATE)

(Value From Honor)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101 WHICH MAY BE USED.